Dr. Ian Billinghurst Interview:

Direct Book Service: The ideas you promote in Give Your Dog a Bone are obviously very appealing to a large number of people. How did you first get interested in canine nutrition?

Ian Billinghurst: The earliest and most important influence was my mum - who knew the importance of eating right. She emphasized balance in all phases of life through having "a little bit of everything". Then came my years at an agricultural high school. One memorable line stands out - "We dig our graves with our knives and forks!" This was followed by Agricultural Science at University - where the role of nutrition in preventative medicine and animal health was constantly emphasized. I had no idea that those early experiences were casting my mind in its "nutrition/prevention" mold.

My veterinary training in Nutrition was abysmal. We were taught to recommend a complete and balanced commercial dog food as the only legitimate way to feed dogs. Early years as a Veterinary Surgeon saw me questioning this training, particularly when my own dogs - fed this way for the first time - began to develop the same problems as my patients!

Studies in acupuncture awakened my interest in "wholism". I switched my dogs to their pre-veterinary school diet - the BARF diet. (BARF = Bones And Raw Food) They returned to normal health. I recommended the same diet to my clients. Their dogs returned to health. No drugs, no acupuncture, no herbs or homeopathy - just pure nutrition. NOW I WAS INTERESTED!

DBS: Tell us about both your formal and informal training in the field. Who have been your mentors?

IB: My formal training in nutrition began in high school with biology and agriculture and continued in my undergraduate years as a student of Agriculture and Veterinary Science. Unfortunately, the only practical thing we learned about pet nutrition was how to read labels - looking for the words "complete and balanced" - and how to open cans or bags of pet food. In that sense I have about the same level of formal training in small animal nutrition as your average vet.

The first book I read on natural Canine Nutrition was The Complete Herbal Book for the Dog, by Juliette de Bairacli Levy. This was pure inspiration. Pat Lazarus, Dr. Pitcairn, Wendell Belfield and a host of others followed. None said what I wanted to say, however. There were other voices demanding to be heard. Demanding a spokesperson.

DBS: What is it about the natural foods approach you recommend that makes it so superior to commercially prepared foods?

IB: The biologically inappropriate commercial pet food programme is based on the never-validated hypothesis that if you work out the energy requirements of pet animals, supply cooked grain, a source of extra protein, and rendered fat to meet those requirements, throw in the currently accepted levels of the other nutrients currently known to be required, lump them together, add masses of salt and sugar, add a whole variety of chemicals to prevent the whole thing going off, to add acceptable color, and to make sure the animals eat it, cook it all up to destroy everything that could possible have any biological activity - the resultant product is the best possible way to feed a pet. Yuk!

My hypothesis is that what an animal evolved to require would be the best way to feed it. The so-called "Natural Foods" are those biologically appropriate foods. In a scientific sense they are far more valid than the commercial approach which seeks to profit from feeding industrial waste to our pets. The natural foods are what the commercial programme seeks to match but never can while ever they seek to supply a "cooked, complete and balanced at every meal" product, based on grain.

A properly balanced natural foods diet based on raw whole foods and which achieves balance over time, will supply EVERY possible nutritional requirement in a biologically appropriate form. Such a diet will contain enzymes, phytochemicals, anti-oxidants, essential fatty acids, probiotics and all the unknown factors not yet discovered by science - all missing from artificial food.

However, the proof of the pudding, as they say, is in the eating. You can dismiss the theories if you want to. What you cannot ignore is the vastly superior health, reproductive ability and longevity of the animals fed the BARF way compared to those on the commercial programme.

DBS: Many things you mention in your book seem to relate only to Australia: ie, certain products, additives, etc. How can readers in the US adapt the diet? (We don't see much kangaroo meat, and lamb is very expensive!)

IB: Give Your Dog a Bone is written to have universal application. That is one of the reasons very few recipes are offered. If you understand the principles of rawness, the need for 60% raw meaty bones or thereabouts, crushed vegetables, offal and so on - you can use whatever is cheaply and locally available to formulate your own diets. Raw chicken on the bone can usually form the mainstay of the raw meaty bone part. If necessary

substitute turkey or duck. For lamb and kangaroo substitute beef or deer or whatever red meat is cheaply available. If in doubt, take some time and re-read the book more carefully. The answers to your questions will leap out at you.

DBS: Many of our customers have a large number of dogs - 12 to 15, or even more. How practical is it to follow your recommendations when there are that many mouths to feed?

IB: Highly practical once you are organized. You will need a freezer and a commercial grade juicer and/or food processor. A health farm for dogs on the eastern coast of Australia feeds over one hundred dogs daily using the BARF diet. One person takes a little over two hours to do so. The Queensland Association for Training Guide Dogs for the visually impaired does exactly the same. This is a topic I will cover in some detail during my lecture tour of the States from October through December this year.

DBS: If a dog owner doesn't have time or money to feed the completely natural diet you recommend, is it of any value to use a commercial dry dog food, and occasionally add eggs, fruit, vegetables, etc., prepared to your instructions?

IB: Occasionally adding a little bit of something to one of those awful dry foods will make very little difference. It is what you do most of the time that counts. If you add stuff on a regular basis, you have to know what you are doing. One of the problems of the commercial programme is that its nutritional balance is so easily upset. If you consistently add eggs and nothing else, for example, you may end up with a diet containing an excess of protein which over time may cause kidney failure.

Adding fruit and vegetables - raw and properly prepared would be OK and may do some good. However, if the dry food you were feeding was already marginal for calories - and you added raw fruit and vegetables in large amounts, you may end up starving the dog.

Many people opt for taking a bet each way. They devise a part commercial and part BARF diet. If they get the BARF bit right, that will be OK. What you see is an improvement in health which is roughly correlated with the proportion of the diet which is the BARF programme.

When dog owners opt to add raw meaty bones to their dry food programme - if they add enough that will certainly improve health matters. Better still if they also add vegetables. Then all they have to do is leave out the dry dog food - and hey - they're doing pretty good!

DBS: When a dog is shifted to your natural diet plan, what changes in health, appearance, etc., should one expect, and how soon?

IB: One of the great joys of my life are the hundreds of positive letters I receive from people who have switched their dogs to the BARF programme. They consistently report an almost instant improvement in body odour, breath odour, energy and level of activity, brightness of eye, attitude and coat. An improved temperament usually takes several days to a week. Old dogs become puppyish over several weeks.

Chronic problems can take longer. Annoying skin problems will take weeks to months, as will many arthritic problems, but brilliant and permanent improvement will occur. Some reproductive problems clear up immediately while others take a number of generations to improve. Many conditions are so severe they require the simultaneous help of other modalities ranging from conventional western medicine through to herbs, acupuncture and homeopathy, etc. Dental health is an example. It can take weeks to months to improve depending on severity - but improve it will. No matter what the health problem a dog has, by switching to a suitably modified - for that condition - BARF diet, there will be a vast improvement in health sooner or later.

DBS: You are planning to visit the U.S. for some personal appearances later this year. Can you tell us when and where?

IB: Yes, my wife and I are delighted to be visiting the States in October this year. There are a series of seminars organized by Puppy Works from the west coast to the east coast. We start off on the 17th of October in Seattle with a 2 and a ½ day seminar for the American Holistic Veterinary Association, then it's off to North Richland Hills, Texas for a 2 day seminar October 24-25; Sanford, FL on Oct. 27; Manchester, CT October 31- November 1; Richmond, VA November 7-8; taking part in the APDT Conference at Valley Forge, PA November 11-15; Maumee, OH November 18-19; Mundelain, IL November 21-22; Bellingham, WA November 28; Olympia, WA November 29; Pasadena, CA December 1, and finally Novato, CA December 5-6.

DBS: We understand you have at least a couple more book ideas in the works. Would you tell us about them?

IB: My new book, Grow Your Pups with Bones, will be coming with me to the States in October. Grow Your Pups with Bones starts with details of the BARF diet which is essential background reading for the rest of the book. The second part of the book, "Feeding for Breeding", could also have been titled "The Breeder's Supplement to Give Your Dog a Bone." In it I deal with all the questions people have been seeking answers to on such

topics as the pregnant bitch, the lactating bitch, weaning puppies, orphan puppies, the stud dog, etc. The third part of the book, "Bones Make Bones", covers a difficult and complex problem - skeletal disease in growing puppies. In it I point out and explain the futility of our current approach to eliminating these problems. They are still very much here despite our best efforts to be rid of them. The simple and practical solution to the whole mess is detailed. Yes, it is possible to grow pups to be free of skeletal problems such as hip dysplasia, elbow dysplasia, panosteitis and so on - no matter what nasty genes we believe they may have inherited. The answers will be with you shortly!

I also plan a book on canine disease, a cat book, an updated version of Give Your Dog a Bone, including a chapter on Greyhounds and other working dogs, and possibly a book on acupressure for pets.

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